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ABSTRACT

Foreign language aptitude was the subject of much research in the 1950s and has been the subject of intermittent research for the last 30 years. Aptitude is measured by the amount of time it takes an individual to learn. Foreign language aptitude appears to differ from general aptitude or intelligence. One theory states that foreign language aptitude consists of four cognitive abilities: (1) phonetic coding, or the ability to segment and identify distinct sounds, form associations between the sounds and their symbols, and retain these associations; (2) grammatical sensitivity, or the ability to recognize the grammatical function of words or other linguistic structures in sentences; (3) rote learning ability in foreign language situations; and (4) inductive language learning ability, or the ability to infer the rules governing language use. Several tests of foreign language ability are in use today for a variety of purposes in government and education. Concerns about the age of currently used language aptitude tests and the need to incorporate new knowledge of aptitude into test design suggest a need for research, test development, and data collection and analysis. The concept of language aptitude may need to be expanded and refined. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST: LANGUAGE APTITUDE RECONSIDERED

by Charles W. Stansfield

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ERIC Digest

Language Aptitude Reconsidered

Prepared by Charles W. Stansfield

December 1989

This *Digest* is based on a monograph in the ERIC/CLL Language in Education series, ***Language Aptitude Reconsidered***, edited by T.S. Parry and C.W. Stansfield (forthcoming). The monograph can be ordered from Prentice Hall Regents, Mail Order Processing, 200 Old Tappan Road, Old Tappan, NJ, 07675 or by calling 1-201-767-5937.

What Is Foreign Language Aptitude?

This basic question is difficult to answer. Foreign language aptitude was the subject of much research during the 1950s and has been the subject of intermittent research during the last 30 years.

Aptitude for learning anything can be defined for operational purposes as "the amount of time it takes an individual to learn the task in question." Thus, individuals typically differ not in whether they can learn a task or not learn it, but rather in the length of time it takes them to learn it or to reach a given degree of competency. This is also true of foreign language aptitude.

Is foreign language aptitude actually different from general aptitude or intelligence? The answer, based on a number of studies (Carroll, 1962; Gardner & Lambert, 1965; Wesche, Edwards & Wells, 1982), seems to be "Yes." Indeed, one index of the quality of a foreign language aptitude test is the degree to which it exceeds a general intelligence test in the prediction of success in learning a foreign language. A number of foreign language aptitude tests, although not all of those that have been developed, have demonstrated the ability to do so.

Carroll (1962) demonstrated that foreign language aptitude is comprised of four cognitive abilities. These abilities are reflected, to one extent or another, in the foreign language aptitude tests that have been developed subsequent to Carroll's research. The first of these abilities is phonetic coding, which is the ability to segment and identify distinct sounds, to form associations between those sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations. This is a rather unique auditory component of foreign language aptitude. It is especially important in classes that emphasize spoken language.

The second component is grammatical sensitivity, the ability to recognize the grammatical function of words or other linguistic structures in sentences. This component may be especially important in classes that emphasize an analytical approach to learning a foreign language.

The third component is rote learning ability as it applies to foreign language learning situations (Carroll, forthcoming). Rote learning ability is a kind of general memory, but individuals seem to differ in their ability to apply their memory to the foreign language situation.

The fourth component is inductive language learning ability. This is the ability to infer the rules that govern the use of language. Again, this component is probably like general inductive learning ability, but individuals may vary in their ability to apply it to the foreign language learning situation.

Foreign Language Aptitude Tests and Their Uses

Several tests of foreign language aptitude are in use today. The *Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery* (PLAB) (Pimsleur, 1966) was developed for students in grades 7 to 12. The *Modern Language Aptitude Test* (MLAT) was developed by Carroll and Sapon (1959) for adults and high school students. Carroll and Sapon (1967) also developed an elementary version, the "EMLAT," for use with children in grades 3 to 6. These tests are available to teachers, although they are not frequently used in public schools. This is unfortunate, because research suggests that these tests may be useful in the academic context for placing and counseling students, and for understanding and appropriately tailoring instruction to the aptitudes, motivations, and learning styles of individuals and groups (Stansfield, 1989).

The MLAT is used extensively by government agencies in the United States and Canada. In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has developed the *Army Language Aptitude Test* (ALAT) (a short language aptitude test), the *VORD* (Parry and Child, forthcoming), and the *Defense Language Aptitude Battery* (DLAB) (Peterson & Al-Haik, 1976). These tests are used in different ways by different agencies. In the DOD, the DLAB is used to select individuals from all the armed services for study at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. The U.S. Government has grouped languages into four categories according to their difficulty for English speakers. A certain minimum DLAB score is associated with qualification for studying the languages in each category of difficulty. Thus, at the DLI, DLAB scores are used for selection and placement (Lett and O'Mara, forthcoming). The government's

intelligence agencies normally use either the MLAT or the ALAT for selection and placement. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) participated in the original validation studies of the MLAT and has continued to use it ever since. The FBI uses the DLAB score and the government's four-category system to determine whether its agents would be successful if sent to receive full-time language training.

The Canadian Public Service Commission, which provides language training to 20,000 government employees each year, uses the MLAT and Parts V and VI of the PLAB. Native French speakers are administered a French version of the MLAT, the *Test d'aptitude de langues vivantes*. Scores on these tests are used to select employees for full-time language training, to place them by language learning ability level, and to determine how long it will take them to develop language skills to a specified proficiency level. Part scores on these tests are also used as a diagnostic measure by teachers who wish to better understand student learning problems.

A New View of Aptitude

In September 1988, an invitational conference was held in Washington, D.C., under the sponsorship of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics and five agencies belonging to the U.S. Government's Interagency Roundtable. The purpose of the conference was to bring together people interested in the prediction of success in second language learning. The conference was motivated by a number of concerns. The aptitude tests currently in use are now between 15 and 30 years old. They do not take into account new insights, revealed by the work of cognitive psychologists, on the human learning process in general and on the language learning process in particular. Nor do they take into account the work of social psychologists who have studied the relation of attitudes, motivation, personality, and other emotional characteristics and predispositions to second language learning. Nor do they take into account the work of educational psychologists who have identified variables such as individual cognitive styles, personal learning strategies, and brain hemisphericity that also seem to be related to successful language learning. These learner variables might be affected by other factors: personal characteristics of the teacher; the instructional method employed; the task or language skill to be learned; the classroom environment in which the learning takes place; and the proficiency level that needs to be acquired. All of these variables need to be examined in a systematic way. A new program of language aptitude research, test development, and data collection and analysis might improve our ability to predict successful language learning and to tailor the classroom environment and instruction to individual students. Perhaps the time has come when the notion of foreign language aptitude needs to be expanded and refined, and related to factors other than the learner. A revised notion of language aptitude might extend beyond a few specified cognitive variables to encompass many other pertinent variables that are related to success in learning a second language. The collection of papers presented at the above mentioned conference (Parry & Stansfield, forthcoming) is intended as a step in that direction.

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